

# The Top Pizzas In New York: Bred and Baked By Tradition

By ERIC ASIMOV  
Published: June 16, 1995

MANY words have been used to explain New York pizza, but one word stands out: tradition.

Respect for tradition is why New York pizzerias go to such lengths to link themselves to the great pizzerias of the past. Tradition explains why Andrew Bellucci called the pizzeria he opened in SoHo last year Lombardi's, after the restaurant opened on Spring Street in 1905 by Gennaro Lombardi, an Italian immigrant who is credited with introducing pizza to New York City. Tradition explains why Mr. Bellucci was able to get the founder's grandson and namesake, Gennaro Lombardi, to advise him in the new venture.

Tradition also explains why three New York pizzerias are called Patsy's: the original, which opened in East Harlem in the 1930's; seven-year-old Patsy's in Brooklyn, and a new Patsy's in Murray Hill. Both of the newer Patsy's claim a connection to the original. Not surprisingly, each disputes the other's claim.

And tradition goes a long way toward explaining the success of Nick's Pizza in Forest Hills, Queens. Although it opened just last year, its respect for the tradition of great New York pizza-making is evident in every delicious bite.

 EMAIL
 PRINT
 SINGLE PAGE

New York City's own style of pizza is so dominant that many New Yorkers may not realize that New Haven is renowned for its brittle-skinned clam pizzas, or that Chicago is the epicenter of the deep-dish pizza, a vital tradition itself. It's common to hear that New York has the best pizza in the country. Whether this is true or not, much of the pizza sold in New York is not very good. That's because most pizzas in New York either are made to be sold by the slice, meaning they are pre-cooked and reheated, which is ill treatment no matter how good the ingredients, or are made to be delivered, which allows a hot pizza to wilt in its cardboard prison.

The invasion of the designer pizza, individual-size pizzas that are often cooked in wood-burning ovens and topped with ingredients from prosciutto to artichoke hearts, has been a good thing for pizza lovers. In truth, good designer pizzas may come the closest to reproducing authentic Italian pizzas. But they are not traditional New York pies.

True New York pizzas are thin crusted, cooked quickly in a very hot oven (traditionally coal-fired) to a charred, smoky crispness, and topped with simple ingredients: tomato sauce or

chopped tomatoes, fresh mozzarella and the optional sausage, peppers, mushrooms or anchovies. And true New York pizza makers, particularly those using coal ovens, are artists, shifting and moving the dough within the oven as it cooks, equalizing the effect of hot spots.

There are hundreds of pizzerias in New York City, and just as many opinions on which are the best. Here are 10 of the most noteworthy New York pizzerias, focusing on those that specialize in whole pies (\$10 to \$18 apiece, depending on extra ingredients) and listed in order of preference. John's Pizzeria

278 Bleecker Street (between Avenue of the Americas and Seventh Avenue), Manhattan, (212) 243-1680.

The dining room of John's sprawls outward, as if it had annexed neighboring spaces by eminent domain, yet it still can't contain the crowds that are drawn here by the restaurant's reputation for legendary pizza. John's earns its reputation every day. This is classic New York pizza, with wonderful thin crust, smoky from the coal oven and just crisp enough to offer resistance to the tooth, made with fresh, creamy mozzarella, the restaurant's own tomato sauce, delicious crumbled sausage and fresh-roasted peppers. Yet what really sets John's apart is the expert economy of its pizzas: no waste and no excessive ingredients piled on for show, just flavor, texture and a regard for tradition.

With booths and tables crammed into all available space, amenities are few at John's, and service is brusque. But as at delicatessens, grumpiness can be rationalized as charm.

John's has opened two branches, at 408 East 64th Street and at 48 West 65th Street. Both make fine pizza, but the original John's is still the best. Nick's Pizza

108-26 Ascan Avenue (near Austin Street), Forest Hills, Queens, (718) 263-1126.

Nick's has been open only since the spring of 1994, yet it seems imbued with age-old tradition, or rather, respect for tradition. From the swinging Sinatra music in the background to the wood floor, tin ceiling with ceiling fans, blue Formica tables, teal booths and big plate-glass windows, Nick's was built to look and feel like a traditional New York pizza parlor, with the added bonus of an up-to-date concern with the comfort of its clientele. The menu says, "No Slices!" just as John's does, yet at Nick's, it sounds pleasant rather than gruff.

Nonetheless, pizza is serious business at Nick's. It's hard to imagine a better crust: blackened and just barely crisp, glistening, golden and blistered around the edges, with a smoky flavor that seems impossible to obtain with a gas oven like Nick's. And the toppings more than stand up to the crust: terrific sausage rich with character; fresh, pure mozzarella; delicious roasted peppers and mushrooms, and each pie garnished with strips of fresh basil. Nick's menu doesn't stray far from pizza, but what little else it offers is just as good: grilled calzones, stuffed with cheese and prosciutto, with a wonderfully puffy crust; very good arugula salads and Caesar salads, and a first-class cannoli with pistachio nuts embedded in the crisp crust.

[1](#) | [2](#) | [3](#) | [4](#) | [NEXT PAGE >](#)

[Home](#) | [Times Topics](#) |

[Member Center](#)

[Copyright 2013 The New York Times Company](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#) |

[Index by Keyword](#)